



## ECOTOURISM IN THANH HOA, VIETNAM

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### ABSTRACT

Rich natural resources, attractive landscape, diverse cultural nuances, Thanh Hoa province has great potentials and advantages to become one of the leading ecotourism centers in Vietnam. Tourism development strategy to 2030 has been issued by the province; however, until now, only a number of types of tourism have been effectively exploited in Thanh Hoa (marine tourism, cultural tourism). Ecotourism, in particular, has not been paid enough attention, which is a big gap in development planning and investment. Ecotourism in the localities are mainly spontaneous with improper practices, which leads to negative impacts on natural, ecological and human environment, especially living environment of local people and causes tourists' disappointment. From the practice of ecotourism in Thanh Hoa, the article focuses on clarifying the issues: Potentials and advantages of Thanh Hoa province in developing ecotourism; Current status of ecotourism activities in Thanh Hoa province and solutions to develop ecotourism towards sustainable development.

**KEYWORDS:** Ecotourism, Thanh Hoa, Vietnam, potential, develop.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

In the context of strong development of the global tourism industry in recent decades, a large number of countries around the world have developed strategies to attract tourists to their countries as much as possible. As a result, they have utilized and exploited to the maximum the potential and advantages of natural and human resources to build unique and impressive tourism products with specific characteristics. Among different tourism types, ecotourism is the priority of many countries in strategy of planning, developing products and attracting tourists. This practice has increased the understanding of ecotourism both in the management system and the community and made ecotourism become a hot topic in scientific conferences on development strategies as well as preservation policies of important ecological regions of countries around the world.

These days, ecotourism is gradually becoming an indispensable need in social life, resulting in more and more diverse and vibrant forms of business associated with ecotourism. Tourism in general, and ecotourism in particular, have become an important economic sector to bring profits to countries in the world including Vietnam. However, the concept of ecotourism until now has not found a consensus. Different concepts have been put forward to clarify ecotourism such as nature tourism, nature based tourism, environment tourism, typical tourism, green tourism ... In addition, a number of authors who are pioneering researchers in ecotourism in the world also gave personal research-oriented definitions. For example, Hector - Ceballos-Lascurain defined "*Ecotourism is the travel to less polluted or disturbed natural areas with specific goals: researching, appreciating and enjoying the landscape, the wildlife, as well as cultural expressions (both in the past and at the present) discovered in these areas*"(1987). In 1998, the American Ecotourism Association introduced the concept that "*Ecotourism is purposeful tourism in natural areas, to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment, without changing the status of ecosystem; and at the same time brings the opportunities to develop the economy, protect natural resources and financial benefits for the local community*". The Nepalese country has the concept of getting a high consensus because of the meaning and responsibility of this type of tourism to the community and nature: "*Ecotourism is a type of tourism that emphasizes the participation of people in the planning and management of tourism resources to enhance community development, link between nature conservation and tourism development, and use tourism income to protect resources that tourism depends on it*" [Pham, 2002: 9]. This concept is quite similar to the definition of The International Ecotourism Society: "*Ecotourism is a type of tourism that is responsible with natural areas where preserve the environment and improves the welfare of the local people*" and similar to the definition stated in Vietnam Tourism Law 2017: "*Ecotourism is a type of tourism based on nature, associated with local cultural identity, with the participation of the community, and combining education on environmental protection*" [National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2017].

In general, the concepts and definitions of ecotourism all aim to respect the nature, protect the ecosystem from human influence, bring benefits to the local community without losing the natural and cultural values in the community where people live. Therefore, ecotourism is also known as *sustainable tourism*.

This issue is perfectly suited to the approaching new century when all human activities need to be sustainable and tourism is not an exception.

Thanh Hoa is a province located in the North Central<sup>2</sup>, Vietnam. It is 153km South of Hanoi, with geographical coordinates from 19°18' to 20°40' of North latitude, from 104°20' to 106°5' of East longitude. The North borders with Hoa Binh and Son La, the South borders with Nghe An, the West borders with Hua Phan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the East is a vast East Sea. Whenever people think of Thanh Hoa or "Xu Thanh", people often remember a land with a long history and the full presence of important historical landmarks in Vietnamese history from ancient times to the present day. Above all, the history has brought Thanh Hoa a rich and diverse cultural heritage representing the historical periods of Vietnam.

In a narrower aspect, Thanh Hoa is classified as a group of provinces with unique natural ecological landscapes with topographic structure of three types: hills - plains - coastal areas. A French scholar H.Le Breton commented that "Thanh Hoa is not only a normal administrative unit, but also a land, an image of the Northern of Vietnam in miniature with rich and fertile deltas, immense grass and rolling hills in the midland, and vast forests in the highland". With great advantages in ecological landscape and unique cultural and historical values, Thanh Hoa province meets all conditions to develop ecotourism.

### 2. RESEARCH METHODS:

The survey method of secondary document is the first one to be used with the search of data related to the research direction in the monographs, results of scientific research projects at all levels, articles published in domestic and foreign scientific journals, dissertations, PhD. theses, etc. The data is collected from National Library of Vietnam; General Library of Thanh Hoa province; Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism; Office of Culture and Information of districts, towns and cities; websites of foreign magazines.

Second, the author conducts field research and survey. This is a method to collect accurate and scientific data with high reliability. This method has been implemented through steps such as: 1/ Investigating and conducting a general survey of ecological zones in Thanh Hoa; 2/ Selecting typical and representative ecological zones for sub-regions: mountainous areas, plains and urban areas and coastal areas. In particular, outstanding natural landscapes, tourism development potentials, the communities living in or near ecological zones, natural environments... are paid more attention. These aspects are the bases for identifying the potential and ability of an ecological zone to become a tourist destination.

Third, the author conducts interviews with 7 experts in the fields of Tourism, Geography, Sociology, Ethnography, Cultural Studies, Local Studies, and Tourism Management. The content of the interview focuses on key issues of valuable experience and current issues for the development of ecotourism in Vietnam and around the world.

The data gathered from the documents, field research and expert interviews are sufficient to conduct the research on ecotourism in Thanh Hoa.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

#### 3.1. Identify the value and potential of eco-tourism in Thanh Hoa:

With a clear structure of three sub-regions, the ecological landscape of each sub-region in Thanh Hoa has its own distinctive features. The analysis, assessment of the value and potential of ecotourism in each sub-region will bring certain advantages in the planning, exploitation and development of ecotourism in Thanh Hoa in particular and Vietnam in general.

- Mountainous sub-region*

It is an administrative area of 11 districts<sup>3</sup>, accounting for 2/3 of the natural area and 1/3 of the provincial population. The mountainous sub-region has the biggest advantage in developing the ecotourism with nature reserves with the National Park being considered the greatest strength of the sub-region.

Considered as a "bright spot of ecotourism", "paradise of evergreen forests", **Pu Luong** Nature Reserve is becoming attractive to any tourists. Pu Luong is the name given by the Thai to refer to the highest peak<sup>4</sup> in the mountains of the Pu Luong range. Pu Luong is located 130km northwest of Thanh Hoa City in 5 communes of Quan Hoa district<sup>5</sup> and 4 communes of Ba Thuoc district<sup>6</sup> with 49<sup>7</sup> villages, mainly Thai and Muong people. The Nature Reserve is situated along two parallel mountain ridges running from the North-west to the South-west. This is the main reason that makes Pu Luong almost keep intact the natural beauty. Villages of ethnic minorities are located deep in the valleys, at the foot of mountains with thousands of trees. In a farther distance, the rice paddies like a giant ladder touching the blue sky, which makes Pu Luong's landscape become more attractive. There are a large number of beautiful places such as Son - Ba - Muoi village<sup>8</sup>, Hieu<sup>9</sup> village, Don<sup>10</sup> village.



**Terraced fields**

Don village, Thanh Lam commune, Ba Thuoc district, Thanh Hoa province  
Source: Authors, 2019

The extension of the Pu Luong Nature Reserve is the Pu Hu Nature Reserve located on the territory of Quan Hoa and Muong Lat districts with an area of 23,249.45 hectares and has been planned since 1999. The Pu Hu Nature Reserve is a combination of primary lowland forest on limestone and schist/shale, primary coniferous submontane forest on limestone and primary submontane forest on basalt. In the reserve, there are a lot of rare and precious species of animals and plants. Among 508 species of plants and 266 animals, there are 28 rare and precious species listed in Vietnam Red List [[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khu\\_bảo\\_tồn\\_thiên\\_nhiên\\_Pu\\_Hu](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khu_bảo_tồn_thiên_nhiên_Pu_Hu)] according to preliminary survey. Besides, there is Co Phay cave with three floors of natural stalactites. With its unique ecological landscapes, in addition to conservation, Pu Hu is also paid attention to tourism planning and development with two main routes: the Ma River route and the route on the peak of Pu Hu.

Xuan Lien Nature Reserve is located in the communes of Bat Moc, Yen Nhan, Xuan Khao, Xuan Lien, Xuan My and Van Xuan of Thuong Xuan district, near the Vietnam - Laos border, surrounded by the Cao River in the North, and sharing the border with Nghe An province to the West and the South, with an area of 23,610 ha. The diversity of animals and plants and the good conservation compared to other nature reserve in the North, the Central or the South of Vietnam has made Xuan Lien Nature Reserve become different and unique with 6,000 hectares of primary forest; 572 species of plants; 38 mammal species recognized, 10 of which are globally threatened species; 136 species of birds belonging to 11 typical sets of 29 families, some of which are in large numbers such as wild chicken, hornbill,...; 53 species of reptiles and amphibians; 143 species of butterflies [Pu Luong Nature Reserve Management Board, 2019: 10]. In addition to the rare and valuable natural ecology, Xuan Lien Nature Reserve is also known as a spiritual

space with Cam Ba Thuoc temple - who was assigned to lead the Can Vuong movement in the late nineteenth century in the mountains in the West of Thanh Hoa province. The temple is located at Cua Dat junction on the right bank of Chu River, next to Ba Chua Thuong Ngan temple. In the East, there is the Temple of Co. Every year, when the spring comes, people in the communes of Xuan Lien Nature Reserve organize a great festival to welcome visitors from different places who come to celebrate the ceremony, and pray for a year of luck and peace. Established in 1992, with an area of 16,643 ha, including 8,544 hectares of primary and regenerated forests [[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vườn\\_quốc\\_gia\\_Bến\\_En](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vườn_quốc_gia_Bến_En)], Ben En National Park offers a very unique ecological landscape of the Southwestern region of Thanh Thanh province. Ben En is likened to "Ha Long on land" because of its pristine beauty, evergreen forests, and beautiful clouds of water - a "precious gem" waiting to be shined. According to the elderly Thai people, this land still holds a lot of epic legends with the Song Muc Lake being a typical example. Moreover, there are 21 large and small islands floating on the lake; each island is given a very lyrical name: Love, Happiness, Couple Mountain, Hope... On the islands, there are also different flora and fauna and beautiful caves. In a far distance, there are Muong, Thai villages that warm the lonely rive space. In addition to lakes, islands and forests, Ben En also has limestone mountain ridges in the communes of Hai Van, Xuan Khang and Xuan Thai with many caves that still retain the natural appearance such as Ngoc cave, Doi cave and Xuan Thai cave... Among them, the most notable is Ngoc cave with a length of 80 meters; 8 meters wide, and 2.5 meters high, and a large number of spectacular shapes inside the cave [[https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vườn\\_quốc\\_gia\\_Bến\\_En](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vườn_quốc_gia_Bến_En)]. In the middle of the cave, there is a large stalactite, sparkling like a jade; therefore, it is called Hon Ngoc. Furthermore, at Dong Muoi cave, Hai Van furnace<sup>11</sup> still retains intact with its fame being not only associated with the name of Professor Tran Dai Nghia<sup>12</sup>. More importantly, the monument was built by the spirit of labor creativity and courage of the Vietnamese army and people, contributing to the victory against strong enemies.



**Ben En National Park**

Nhu Thanh district, Thanh Hoa province  
Source: <https://www.google.com.vn>

An ecological - cultural space not to be missed in the mountainous sub-region is **Cam Luong Fish Lagoon**<sup>13</sup>. Originating from the spring of water deep in the limestone mountain of Bo Um, a short stream is the habitat of a large population of fish, but until now, there has not been any scientific research, exactly explaining the origin of fish streams and fish stocks. However, Muong people have their own explanation - a kind of explanation which is full of mystery. The ecological landscape here is considered a masterpiece of nature ranging with limestone mountains having different spectacular shapes brought about by the erosion. From the inside of the Truong Sinh limestone mountain range, there is a murmuring stream around Ngoc village, then flowing into the mother river (Ma River). The spring water is clean and fresh throughout the year, whether it is the dry season or the flood season, which explains why it is called Ngoc stream or Minh Chau stream. Ngoc stream is fully located in the valley, surrounded by thousands of evergreen forests like a giant cradle.

The mountainous region of Thanh Hoa has not only nature reserves and national parks as potential ecological spaces, but also a large number of other attractive ecological landscapes, especially waterfalls and caves which are considered one of the important potentials of the subregion. According to the results of the survey, there are 07<sup>14</sup> waterfalls with bright water flows, 02<sup>15</sup> wild but magnificent caves like stalactite "castles". In addition, the ecological spaces of the sub-region is even more beautiful thanks to the villages of Thai, Muong, Mong, Dao, Kho Mu, Tho people. These villages have more or less contributed to creating an area meeting all the elements and advantages for the development of tourism types, in which ecotourism is a strength of the subregion.

- *Delta subregion*

The delta sub-region of Thanh Hoa province is the type of coastal accumulating delta; a delta-shaped triangle is filled with alluvium of the Ma, Chu and Yen rivers. The subregion is the administrative area of 10 districts, towns and cities<sup>16</sup>. The natural landscape is formed and dominated by rivers, especially the Ma River. A large number of researchers have ranked the Ma River Delta third after the Red River Delta in the North and the Mekong River Delta in the South. Compared to the Red River Delta, the Ma River Delta is less flat and less fertile. There are also places with the terrain of the basin such as Ha Trung and Nong Cong that are easily flooded in the rainy season. Different from other deltas throughout the country, the Ma River Delta has a lot of bowl-shaped mountains with low peaks on the flat fields. As a result, the mountainous and sub-delta areas of Thanh Hoa are felt to be not much different.

Besides the tectonics of the earth's crust, the small impact of the Ma River is the second reason that gives the sub-region "unique" landscapes. The most prominent, typical and representative one is the ecological and cultural space - Ham Rong and water area - Nga Ba Bong.

The ecological - cultural space of **Ham Rong** is the most striking place in the delta subregion. Being evaluated as a sacred land and the heart of Thanh province, Ham Rong ecological - cultural space in the past was recognized to be extremely vast, including the landscape of Dragon Mountain (Long Ham) (popularly known as the Dong Son mountain range), extending to Nam Ngan village in the West – East direction and from Hoang Long, Hoang Quang, Hoang Loc communes (the other side of Ham Rong bridge) to Nhoi Mountain<sup>17</sup> in the North-South direction. Since ancient times, Ham Rong has been famous for a large quantity of beautiful landscapes. The most beautiful is the Dragon Mountain Range, which originates in Duong Xa village with 99 mountains in the East and one mountain named Hoa Chau in the South of the Ma River. Besides, there are other gorgeous moutains such as Tuong Son, Trang Tien, Ma Yen, Canh Tien, Vang Con (Golden Pig) and Cuoc (So Do Mountain). In the heart of the mountains, through the tectonic process, the caverns have been created (Long Quan cave, Dragon Eye cave)... making the landscape here more gloomy and magical.

Ham Rong - the convergence of mountains and rivers, associated with the Dong Son culture which is famous around the world. In Ham Rong ecological space, there still exist a variety of cultural heritages from the ancient time to the present day. Through the history, the cultural heritages of Ham Rong have "put on different coats of time", including values reaching the peak of the art. A large number of experts and researchers commented that the quintessence of Thanh Hoa culture is present in Ham Rong ecological - cultural space. In terms of historical or present position, Ham Rong is an important geopolitical - economic - cultural - military area of Thanh Hoa province as well as the whole country. With great potential for ecological and cultural landscape, Ham Rong is a potential space in the province's strategy of developing eco-tourism and cultural tourism.

Along the Ma River's flow, after leaving the rugged mountain area with a lot of rapids to the delta (starting from Vinh Loc district), the Ma River becomes peaceful, calm, and gentle with the river bed being expanded by the open space of a rich delta.

In Quang Han (Ha Trung), the Ma River divides a branch, called the Len River, or Nga Giang River, Dai Lai River, Nam Thac River, Su River, Che River in the history book... Then, the main branch continues downstream and into the sea. The confluence of the Ma River is called **Nga Ba Bong**, which is an especially important position, the cultural intersection of three sub-regions of Thanh Hoa: coastal - delta - mountainous subregions, and the intersection of five districts popularly known for the thing that "*all the five districts all hear the sound of chicken crow*"<sup>18</sup>.

The ancient Ba Bong junction is described in the history book as "a busy hub", with floating markets on the river. The waterway was used as the main way from the Hung King dynasty to the end of the feudal period because of its usefulness and the unpopularity of the road. The Ma River has the advantage of flowing from the Northwest - Southeast, which is convenient for travelling to the East Sea and up to Hoa Binh and Son La, or Laos... In economic trade, cultural values are produced, flourished and developed.

People all over the region know the confluence of the river - the convergence of rivers - mountains, and the place named after a famous river God of the whole region - Co Bo Thoai Cung. She was embodied as a cultural hero, the Lady of Water that is popularly known as Mau Thoai (Mother of Water)... This is a type of beliefs with ancient origins and inheritance of the ancient national and indigenous beliefs. The presence of different historical relics of high cultural and artistic value also creates an important highlight of Nga Ba Bong ecological space: Ly Thuong Kiet Temple, Han Son Temple and Co Bo Temple. Associated with worshiping saints, there are Legend stories, unique rituals, and traditional festivals.

Although the delta subregion of Thanh Hoa does not have as many potentialities and advantages of ecological landscapes as mountainous subregion, "unique" landscapes in this subregion are the greatest potentials and advantages of the delta subregion of Thanh Hoa.

- *Coastal subregion*

The coastal subregion of Thanh Hoa consists of 6 districts<sup>19</sup>, and cities along the coast from the North and the South with a length of 102km; and 06 large estuaries<sup>20</sup>. The coast of Thanh Hoa province is commented that "There are few bends to create a lake/bay; however, at a lot of points, the separation of different rivers and the contiguity of mountains and the sea have created unique ecological landscapes. In addition, there are a large number of conditions for developing ecotourism and other types of exploration and resort tourism.

Along 102km of coastal line of Thanh Hoa, there are 5 beaches: Sam Son; Bai Dong, Hai Hoa, Hai Thanh (Tinh Gia), Hai Tien (Hoang Hoa). Although these beaches are not as beautiful as My Khe beach ("the muse" of Da Nang), they are still attractive with wild and mysterious beauty, which increases visitor's interest and desire of exploration. Among the beaches in Thanh Hoa, **Sam Son** has plentiful and diversified tourism potentials, including natural and humanistic tourism resources. This is the most outstanding advantage of Sam Son, which is a very favorable condition to develop different types of attractive tourism such as sea tourism, mountain tourism, cultural-historical tourism, ecotourism, and spiritual tourism...

In terms of natural tourism resources, Sam Son has a coastline of about 9 km, from Cua Hoi (Ma river) to Vung Tien (Vung Ngoc) with beautiful beaches such as urban beaches (A, B, C, D), Quang Cu, Nix, Lan and Vu Tien beaches ... These beaches are all broad, and flat with gentle slope, fine white sand, moderate waves, warm sea water, and salt concentration of about 30%, together with Canxitium and other minerals with healing effects ... Those characteristics are very suitable for swimming and entertainment activities; as a result, the French soon chose Sam Son as a resort for the army. Besides beautiful beaches, Sam Son is also mentioned with the 76-meter-high Truong Le mountain range, which is close to the sea and is considered the "pearl". The steep cliffs leading to the sea have created the grandeur of Truong Le Mountain. On Truong Le Mountain, there are monuments such as Doc Cuoc temple, Co Tien temple, To Hien Thanh temple.... Especially, Hon Trong Mai on Truong Le Mountain is a unique natural landscape of Sam Son as well as of the whole country, which is very attractive to tourists. In addition, the natural landscape along the two banks of the Ma River is also an ideal condition for Sam Son to develop ecotourism routes on the river and the sea.

In addition to natural tourism resources, Sam Son also has a plentiful humanistic tourism resource including cultural historical relics, festivals, traditional trades and other cultural values. According to the statistics of Department of Culture and Information of Sam Son city, the city is one of the localities with a high proportion of relics throughout the country with 16 monuments, including 6 national monuments<sup>21</sup>, 10 provincial relics<sup>22</sup>, different traditional festivals full of humanity, and traditional handicrafts effectively preserved and developed [Culture-Information Department of Sam Son city, Thanh Hoa province, 2019: 3].

Extending the coastal area to the North, there are Hoang Tien and Hoang Truong beaches (Hoang Hoa district); and extending to the South, there are Quang Loi Beach (Quang Xuong District) and Hai Hoa (Tinh Gia District). These are marine tourism spaces which are adjacent to each others, have formed value chain and have been put into operation in the past few years. The beaches still retain the original values in the ecological characteristics and marine culture. Therefore, tourists will have the opportunity to deeply understand the locality through visiting ancient Vietnamese coastal villages, traditional craft villages, and cultural historical sites on the occasion of the festival. This is considered the greatest potential and strength of these coastal areas.

### **3.2. Current status of ecotourism in Thanh Hoa:**

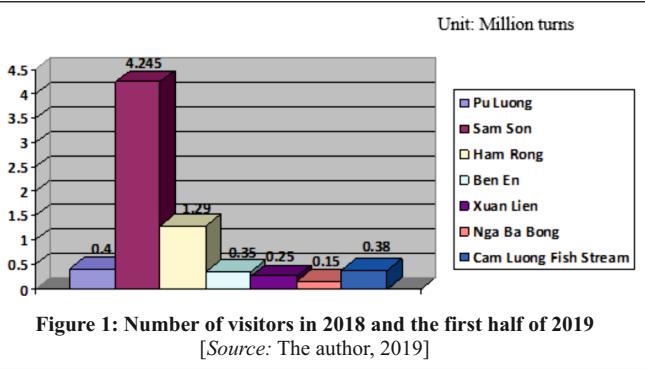
Ecotourism activities in Thanh Hoa have been developing in a positive direction for nearly a decade and have brought practical benefits in terms of economy - culture - society for the local people in the province. Initial success must include the support of international organizations, investors and especially authorities at all levels. On February 9, 2015, Thanh Hoa Provincial People's Committee issued Decision No. 492/QĐ-UBND approving the "Tourism Development Strategy of Thanh Hoa Province to 2025, with a vision to 2030", including investment and development of ecotourism spaces: Pu Luong, Pu Hu, Xuan Lien, Bo Cung cave, Ben En National Park ... [People's Committee of Thanh Hoa province, 2015]. This is an opportunity for ecotourism activities in Thanh Hoa province to catch up with the development of localities in the country and in the region.

In order to assess the current status of ecotourism, the author developed 4 evaluation contents according to the following criteria: (i) Number of visitors to ecotourism spaces; (ii) Annual increase in the number of households participating in business activities at ecotourism sites/spaces; (iii) People's income from participating in ecotourism activities; (iv) Organization and management of ecotourism activities in localities. To collect information, the author conducted a survey with a questionnaire, in-depth interview (in both English and Vietnamese) for 07 managers in the ecotourism spaces (mountainous subregion: 04; delta subregion: 02; coastal subregion: 01) and in-depth interview with 210 tourists (domestic and foreign tourists). The results are presented as follows:

#### *(i) Number of visitors to ecotourism spaces:*

It is shown that not all spaces with natural ecological advantages attract

tourists. According to the interviews with local tourism and cultural managers and based on the reports in 2018 and first 6 months of 2019, the author assessed the attraction of destinations through the number of tourists. It is indicated that, 100% of the interviewees said that Pu Luong (40 thousand turns); Sam Son (over 4,245 million turns) and Ham Rong (1.29 million turns) are the places that attract the most tourists. In particular, Sam Son and Pu Luong experienced high growth in 2018 and the first half of 2019.



**Figure 1: Number of visitors in 2018 and the first half of 2019**

[Source: The author, 2019]

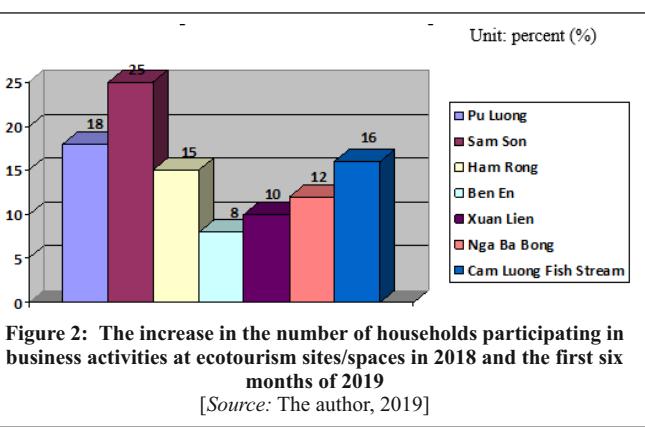
Attraction for international tourists is the weakness of most ecotourism spaces. Currently, only Pu Luong is the most popular destination for international tourists. Of the 40,000 visitors, there were 13,000 (32%) international visitors from countries, respectively: France, England, Germany, Australia, Netherlands, USA, Newzealand and mainly buying tours of public companies located in Ha Noi. In remaining ecotourism spaces, the proportion of international visitors accounts for 3-5% of total tourists per year. This is a very modest number compared to the attraction of this type of tourism.

The level of attraction of destinations is assessed by tourists respectively Pu Luong, Sam Son (100%); Ben En and Xuan Lien (70%); Cam Luong Fish Stream (55%); Ham Rong (40%); Nga Ba Bong (25%) while other spaces are not favorable destinations. The choice of a tourist destination depends on different aspects such as good promotion, the real attraction of the destination, perfect complementary services; friendliness of local people; conditions of facilities, transportation... Therefore, it is essential to deal with the limitations in the current context of global tourism competition.

*(ii) Annual increase in the number of households participating in business activities at ecotourism sites/spaces:*

In ecotourism spaces in Thanh Hoa, local people have not been really proactive, while local authorities are confused in directing and guiding people to participate in tourism activities. As a result, improper, spontaneous and small tourism activities are taking place everyday in most ecotourism spaces (except for some well-invested coastal tourism spaces). Therefore, the potentials and values of ecotourism activities in the localities have not been fully exploited.

Based on the provincial tourism development strategy and the interest of the authorities at all levels, local people are gradually being aware of the benefits of ecotourism, and their own responsibilities in protecting their living space. As a result, the number of households participating in ecotourism business is increasing every year. However, the increase varies at different tourism spaces.



**Figure 2: The increase in the number of households participating in business activities at ecotourism sites/spaces in 2018 and the first six months of 2019**

[Source: The author, 2019]

The increase of business households participating in ecotourism business activities is calculated based on the total number of households that have previously done business. According to the figure, it is indicated that Sam Son and Pu Luong have the highest increase, followed by Ham Rong, Xuan Lien, Ben En and Nga Ba Bong respectively. These increases have partly shown the attractiveness of the destination. However, current business activities in

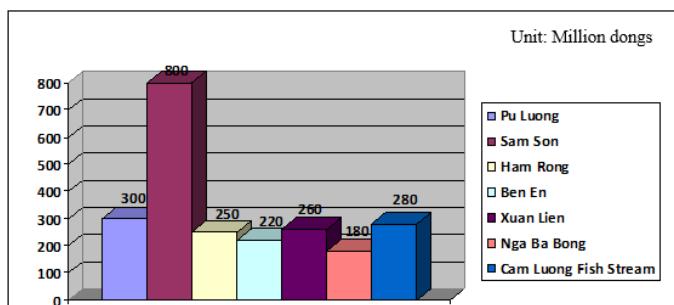
the ecotourism space are basically serving food and drink, accommodation and simple additional services. There is a lack of experiential tourism activities and on-spot local cultural community tourism activities.

The community's understanding of tourism and tourism business is gradually being raised when the propaganda and training of tourism knowledge and tourism business are well implemented by the localities on a more frequent basis... However, in order to meet the diverse needs of tourists, the community should be continuously trained of additional skills such as communication skills in tourism, especially foreign languages.

*(iii) People's income from participating in ecotourism activities:*

Compared with other ecotourism sites in the country such as Sapa, Ha Giang, Dac Lac, Hoa Binh, and the Southwest provinces..., the revenue from ecotourism activities of households in ecotourism spaces in Thanh Hoa province is still modest. However, in a comparison with traditional business activities, the income generated from tourism has greatly improved the living standards of households. This can be clearly seen through the difference of the income and living standards between the households involved in tourism business and the ones still practicing farming and animal husbandry activities.

The average monthly income from tourism business of each household is from 5 million to 15 million VND, excluding other income sources from traditional farming and animal husbandry activities that people still maintain. Besides, local people still can earn more money when they develop experienced travel models for visitors.



**Figure 3: The average income from ecotourism business activities of some tourism spaces per a household in 2018**

[Source: The author, 2019]

The main source of income comes from the business of accommodation, beverage, natural exploration, sales of local product and souvenir items, and traditional arts performance. Basically, local people have not been equipped with knowledge of tourism or are prepared psychologically for the change of living environment when tourism activities take place. Therefore, the business activities were launched without specific plans, including business registration, mainly from the needs of tourists.

Tourism business activities on the one hand provide income, create local jobs for local people; however, they are mainly spontaneous with a little participation of the households. As a result, tourism business activities have led to the difference between the rich and the poor in the localities. Meanwhile, the goal of ecotourism activities is to get the participation of the majority of local people in order that they can all enjoy the benefits from ecotourism activities and be responsible for their negative issues. The gap between the rich and the poor has led to unsustainable ecotourism development.

*(iv) Organization and management of ecotourism activities:*

Tourism has been chosen to become a key economic sector in Thanh Hoa province. The authorities have issued a large number of guidelines and policies to promote the advantages of geographic location, the value of resources for tourism development. The provincial Party Committee issued the Tourism Development Program of Thanh Hoa province in the period of 2016-2020 while the provincial People's Committee approved the Tourism Development Strategy of Thanh Hoa Province to 2025 with a vision to 2030 and the Comprehensive Planning for Tourism Development of Thanh Hoa to 2020. Besides, the development of products tourism in general and ecotourism in particular is being invested, especially in the mountainous areas in the Western part of Thanh Hoa province: Pu Luong Nature Reserve, Pu Hu, Ben En National Park, Ma Hao Waterfall - Nang Cat village (Tri Nang commune, Lang Chanh district), tourist routes along the Ma River ... In recent years, ethnic minorities in the mountainous areas of Thanh Hoa have gradually acquainted and enthusiastically participated in activities of ecotourism development.

The biggest difficulty in the management and organization of ecotourism activities is the establishment of state management organizations in accordance with regulations. In fact, there has been a law and legal documents

clearly stipulating the formation of organizations and management boards; however, when applied into reality, there are still a lot of shortcomings, especially the issue of funding to maintain the operations and professional human resources... According to the results of the survey of ecotourism spaces in Thanh Hoa, there are a number of forms of management in ecotourism spaces in Thanh Hoa. First, ecotourism spaces are nature reserves or national parks with the management activities being directly assigned to the Nature Reserve Management Boards. Second, the management activities are assigned to the Local Monuments and Landmarks Management Board. Third, the management activities are directly assigned to the District People's Committee or the Commune People's Committee.

The current inconsistency in managing ecotourism spaces in Thanh Hoa in the establishment of a flexible management system according to reality also leads to a large number of difficulties in operating and organizing activities, specifically, unprofessional human resources, unprofessional and incomprehensive organization and guidance of tourism activities for local people. Therefore, it is very urgent to improve the system of legal documents with clear regulations in ecotourism management decentralization in particular.

#### **4. BENEFITS AND DIFFICULTIES IN DEVELOPING ECOTOURISM AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

##### **4.1. Benefits:**

Tourism activities have changed the perception and thinking of the local people in the organization and structure of the industry. Tourism activities also bring a certain source of income, increase living standards, and especially somewhat deal with employment issues for the locality – a problem previously caused a lot of difficulties for local people in which a large number of people (mostly young people) have to leave their villages and hamlets to work in industrial parks and big cities far away their homeland.

The implementation of ecotourism activities has become the best way to preserve the natural and traditional values of local people, to build and strengthen people's pride in the nuance of the national culture; thereby, respect and preserve the historical values of their ancestors and the values that people cultivate every day.

Ecotourism development is an opportunity for local people to meet, exchange and absorb the positive values brought by tourists across localities, regions and countries around the world. Ecotourism also helps people expand their vision in both ways of thinking and working. In addition, it is also the basis for promoting the image of local people and culture to international friends, with tourists being effective marketers.

##### **4.2. Difficulties:**

Although in recent times, ecotourism activities have made positive changes, contributing to poverty reduction, job creation and income generation for people; however, compared to other ecotourism spaces, in general, ecotourism in Thanh Hoa is still facing with the following difficulties:

The number of households participating in tourism business accounts for a small proportion of the total number of households in tourism spaces. This is contrary to the goal of ecotourism development, which is the benefits of community and sustainable development.

Tourism activities of local people are almost spontaneous. The system of mechanisms, policies and legal provisions related to tourism development is insufficient and does not fully facilitate development and international integration. As a result, the relationship between management and development has not been well resolved. Besides, the attraction of investors to potential tourism areas and destinations of the region has not been improved. Furthermore, the cooperation among different levels and sectors in the state management of tourism is not really effective. The planning and forecast of tourism development trends for the whole region in the long period have not been well implemented.

Although the number of visitors coming to the ecotourism spaces increases every year, it is uneven, unstable with short stay. The number of international visitors is still modest. This proves that the selection and construction of specific and high-quality tourism products with own brands in ecotourism spaces is not effective with unprofessional additional services and poor tourism products and services, mainly "seasonal products".

Social infrastructure is still inadequate, backward and lack of uniformity, failing to meet development requirements for the tourism industry. Transportation system in difficult areas, especially ecotourism space in mountainous areas is very rugged, with the access road mainly being small village roads. Most of the potential villages for ecotourism development are in the poor villages, unable to invest in tourism development.

The current biggest difficulty is the limited awareness of local authorities as well as people of all social classes about the significance of the tourism industry to socio-economic development. People still keep backward cultivation practices, deforestation, or forest burning for cultivation, which harms the envi-

ronmental landscape. The encouragement and support of the residential community having tourism resources to participate in tourism activities in mountainous districts are currently facing a lot of difficulties. Due to lack of capital and supportive measures, local people are not encouraged to participate in protecting natural resources and tourism environment.

Propaganda, promotion, image promotion of tourist destinations are weak and lack of funding. Moreover, the training and development of high quality tourism human resources has not been paid adequate attention.

#### **4.3. Recommendations:**

- *Solutions on planning:*

It is necessary to have specific statistics, analysis and assessment of the potential and value of ecotourism spaces in Thanh Hoa province. Accordingly, orientations and strategies for planning the spaces are given with specific planning contents: names of tourism spaces; typical travel products and purposes; estimated investment capital; determination of investment phases and implementation schedules.

- *Solutions on the organization of mechanism and policy:*

- Create a comprehensive mechanism for tourism management and tourism resource management according to regulations, and corresponding to the functions and tasks of a spearhead economic sector; improve the capacity of tourism management human resources.
- On the basis of spatial planning orientations, the localities promote the implementation of detailed planning projects, strictly manage the planning; establish close relationships between the local ecotourism space with other localities and surrounding areas in order to create a connection and attractiveness of tourism products to tourists, create motivation and mutual support to develop local, provincial and non-provincial tourism.

- Invest in the preservation and restoration of annual cultural and historical relics and ranked cultural – historical monuments. In addition, the state budget should also be used to support a number of fields such as human resource training, and tourism promotion. The investment should be synchronous with focus on the main relics that have been planned.

- Integrate tourism development programs with development programs of other industries related to tourism activities such as: rural transport development programs associated with development of tourism infrastructure systems; environmental programs associated with programs on conservation and restoration of tourism resources and environment; poverty reduction programs associated with tourism development.

- *Solutions on building typical tourism products:*

Focus on taking the advantages of specific ecotourism resources of each locality; conduct surveys and assess the current status of tourism products (quality, quantity, the ability to meet the needs, tastes of visitors) and of the potential to create unexploited products; accordingly, the plans should be made to build unique and high-quality tourism products meeting tourists' needs.

- *Solutions on tourism promotion:*

Localities need to develop tourism promotion programs based on their strengths and typical products to the domestic and foreign markets. At the same time, other programs should be implemented to propagate and promote tourism space through cultural events, tourism promotion, and tourism exhibition, conference, and seminar to introduce the potentials of local ecotourism. The quality and efficiency of Thanh Hoa tourism website in tourism promotion should be improved.

- *Solutions on training and developing human resources:*

Gather and train managerial and professional officials capable of administering tourism activities; expand cooperation in training human resources with tourism professional establishments and organizations; support community education in order that people are directly involved in tourism activities.

- *Solution on protection of natural resources and environment:*

Organize the study and implementation of legal documents on environmental resource management; Develop a system of criteria for evaluating and classifying ecotourism resources, and develop standards for tourism environment; conduct review and classification of ecotourism resources of potentials, values and requirements for the conservation of resources for tourism development; develop educational programs and raise people's awareness about environmental protection.

#### **5. CONCLUSION:**

With a lot of potentials, Thanh Hoa province meets all conditions to build, plan, invest and develop ecotourism spaces that are suitable for national and international bases. Although, in recent years, ecotourism has significantly changed, these developments have not really matched its inherent potentials. There are still a large number of restrictions on tourism space planning, typical tourism products and tourism management capacity...; the lacks of tourism services; and little participation of people on tourism business. Therefore, it is urgent to have practical solutions, especially the solutions on planning, tourism product devel-

opment, tourism promotion, human resources, and natural resources and environment protection. These solutions will be important foundations for achieving the objectives of ecotourism development in Thanh Hoa in the future./.

**\*Notes:**

- I. The concept was quoted in the Ecotourism lecture by Nguyen Thi Son
- II. Together with the provinces: Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue
- III. Nhu Xuan, Nhu Thanh, Thuong Xuan, Lang Chanh, Ba Thuoc, Quan Hoa, Quan Son, Muong Lat, Ngoc Lac, Cam Thuy and Thach Thanh
- IV. 1,200m high above sea level
- V. Phu Nghiem, Hoi Xuan, Thanh Xuan, Phu Xuan, Phu Le
- VI. Thanh Son, Thanh Lam, Co Lung, Lung Cao 7 Kho Muong Village, Dong Dieng Village, Nong Cong Village, Pa Ban Village, Eo Ken Village, Bang Village, Pa Kha Village (Thanh Son Commune); Bam Village, Leo Village, Don Village, Ngon Village, Mo Village, Coc Village, Chu Village, Danh Village (Thanh Lam Commune); Lac Village, Khuyen Village, Na Kha Village, Eo Dieu Village, Long Village, Doc Village, La Ca Village, Hieu Village, Nang Villa Village, Tien Moi Village, Pia Village (Co Lung Commune); Dong Tam Village, Vinh Quang Village (Phu Nghiem Commune); Ngheo Village (Hoi Xuan Commune); Kho Village, Thanh Son Village (Thanh Xuan Commune); Pan Village, Mo Village (Phu Xuan Commune); Tan Phuc Village, Hang Village, Duom Village (Phu Le Commune)
- VII. Lung Cao Commune, Ba Thuoc District
- VIII. Co Lung Commune, Ba Thuoc District
- IX. Thanh Lam Commune, Ba Thuoc District
- X. Hai Van Commune, Nhu Thanh District, Thanh Hoa Province
- XI. Professor, Academician, Major General, Labor Hero Tran Dai Nghia (13/9/1913 - 13/9/2018) - a great scientist, an excellent person of Vinh Long province
- XII. Cam Luong Commune, Cam Thuy District, Thanh Hoa Province
- XIII. Huou Waterfall (Ba Thuoc), Ma Hao Waterfall (Lang Chanh), Mo Waterfall (Ba Thuoc), May Waterfall, Voi Waterfall (Thach Thanh), Trai Gai Waterfall, Yen Ngua Waterfall (Thuong Xuan). The most famous caves are Bo Cung Cave and La Ha Mountain (Quan Son)...
- XIV. Bo Cung Cave, Chanh Village, Son Thuy Commune, Quan Son District (Thanh Hoa); Nua Cave, Nua Village, Lung Cao Commune, Ba Thuoc District
- XV. Thanh Hoa City, Bim Son Town, Dong Son District, Ha Trung District, Nong Cong District, Thieu Hoa District, Tho Xuan District, Trieu Son District, Vinh Loc District, and Yen Dinh District
- XVI. Dong Tan, Dong Hung Communes of Dong Son District
- XVII. Ha Trung, Yen Dinh, Thieu Hoa, Hau Loc, Vinh Loc
- XVIII. Districts: Nga Son, Hau Loc, Hoang Hoa, Quang Xuong, Tinh Gia and Sam Son City
- XIX. Lach Sung, Lach Trao, Lach Truong, Lach Hoi, Lach Ghep, Lach Bang
- XX. Doc Cuoc Temple, Co Tien Temple, To Hien Thanh Temple, Hon Trong Mai, De Linh Temple, Ca Lap Temple
- XXI. Hoang Minh Tu Temple (also known as Ha temple), Luong Trung Village Temple, Ba Trieu Temple, Hoi Village Temple, Thanh Khe Temple, Do Hau Temple, Ngu Ong Temple, the place where Uncle visited and participated in going fishing with Sam Son fishermen, the place where the hero Nguyen Thi Loi fought with a French warship, the gathering place for students from the South to the North after the Geneva Agreement and the place to receive the prisoners of the Southern Revolution to the North after the Paris Agreement ...

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- XV. Website: [https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vườn\\_quốc\\_gia\\_Bến\\_En](https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vườn_quốc_gia_Bến_En)